

Times Argus

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Let nature take its course

The bureaucratic process has ended, and now the political process will begin with the creation of new wilderness areas in Vermont. The U.S. Forest Service completed work on its new forest plan, recommending the addition of about 27,000 acres of new wilderness in the Green Mountain National Forest.

Only Congress has the power to designate official wilderness areas, which are off limits to all logging, snowmobiling, ATVs or other mechanized activity. Now Vermont's three-man congressional delegation has proposed a bill that would create about 47,000 acres of new wilderness. That would bring the total acreage of wilderness areas in Vermont to about 106,000 acres.

The proposal from Sens. James Jeffords and Patrick Leahy and Rep. Bernard Sanders has already drawn fire from those opposing the creation of any new wilderness. The arguments of the critics include the economic, the environmental and the cultural. The economic argument is that Vermont's timber industry suffers when land is placed off limits to logging. Logging is an essential component of Vermont's economy, and the national forest is a resource that ought to be managed for the economic benefit of working Vermonters.

The environmental argument is that logging opens up the forest, creating habitat for a rich diversity of wildlife, including the white-tailed deer and a variety of birds. The forest itself is more diverse if different sections are in varying degrees of regeneration. The cultural argument may inspire the greatest fury among opponents of wilderness. They see wilderness areas as the province of a tiny elite of hikers and backpackers who are intent on keeping snowmobiles, ATVs and chain saws out of the woods.

It is possible to accommodate both those who favor wilderness and those who want more intense use of the forest, but only through an agreement that allows for wilderness in some areas. The plan put forward by the Forest Service actually calls for increased logging in the forest, as well as increased wilderness.

Logging has been at a virtual standstill in the national forest in recent

years because of a variety of legal challenges, and it will be good both for economic and the environmental reasons when increased logging gets started up again. It is unlikely that the proposed wilderness areas would be on the timber market in any event. They are remote and not easily accessible. That is why they are suitable for wilderness designation.

An odd sort of mental gymnastics has occurred among some opponents of wilderness. One of them referred to wilderness designation as the "privatization" of wilderness, meaning that it would become the private domain of that tiny elite of backpackers. But he has it backwards. Selling timber to loggers would be privatization. It's not a bad thing, but there is no reason it has to happen everywhere. Nor is there reason for snowmobiling and ATVs to happen everywhere. It irks ardent snowmobilers to be told that some public land is off limits to them. But if the interests of wilderness lovers are also to be honored, wilderness must be preserved. It is true that timber cuts have the effect of opening up land for wildlife, and that is why logging in parts of the forest is good. But nature untrammelled is a rare thing, and it is also good to allow nature to follow its course in some parts of the forest. Those areas will become mature climax forest, and the wildlife will change accordingly. There might be fewer deer in those areas. But the premise of wilderness areas is that nature ought to have its say at least in some special places. The wilderness question will now become a political issue, and Leahy, Jeffords and Sanders will get their ears full of objections from timber interests and those who see themselves as anti-elitists. But a broad cross-section of Vermonters appreciates the value of wilderness areas, even if hordes do not hike in them. The elitism charge can be hurled in both directions, and it should be discarded.

The three members ought to consider one change in the wilderness bill. They have proposed calling the parcel in Goshen and Hancock the Battell Wilderness Area after Joseph Battell, who at one time owned much of the land around Bread Loaf. There is already a George D. Aiken Wilderness area — 5,060 acres in Woodford — named after the Vermont senator who was an early pioneer of wilderness preservation. Another champion of the environment is retiring after this year. It would fitting if one of the new parcels was known into posterity as the James M. Jeffords Wilderness Area.